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Caste, Fear and Social Injustice: A Critical Analysis of Premchand's "The Thakur's Well"

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Abstract:

Premchand's short story "The Thakur's Well" explores caste-based discrimination, deprivation and fear deeply embedded in rural Indian society. Through the characters of Gangi and Jokhu, the narrative presents the Dalit experience of humiliation, exclusion and struggle for basic needs like water. This paper critically examines the story's themes of caste oppression, economic vulnerability, denial of education and psychological subjugation. It highlights how power and privilege control resources and create constructed notions of "purity" and "contamination" to sustain hierarchy. Using textual analysis, it also reflects on gender, land, fear and the absence of rebellion among the oppressed. The paper argues that Premchand uses Gangi's failed attempt to fetch clean water not just as a literal act but as a metaphor for systemic denial of dignity and rights.

Keywords: Premchand; Dalit literature; caste discrimination; rural India; untouchability; fear and oppression; resource denial.

Introduction:

Premchand has been one of the prominent writers of his time to portray life of dalit's with gruesome details, taking his readers through their dirty, tough and humiliating lives in rural India. While in Valmiki's "Where can Satish go?" we will be exploring the urban set-up of discrimination levied upon the dalits, here we have Gangi and her husband within their own village, having resided there all their lives, always discriminated against and humiliated continuously. While a chance of avoiding this discrimination can arise in an urban format, within a rural set-up the discrimination begins at birth, defined by their caste affiliation which is common knowledge there. This same caste defines where they can be allotted some space to build a small hut to shelter themselves. They were not allowed to choose or decide a locality for themselves, for this discriminated lot were not allowed to have houses close to the rest of the village. They were designated different wells to fetch water from, far away from the rest of the village, which was considered an act of mercy!

In a rural set up land has a great relevance and importance, land denotes agriculture, prosperity, economic stability and a sense of belonging. The lower castes were generally grouped together in a sort of a colony, where some land was allotted to them to make houses, essentially huts, for the lack of money and means made any other amenities impossible for them. These colonies were set up away from the main village to keep them away from the living areas of the upper castes, just



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because of the nature of the menial jobs that these people had to do, which was also not a choice but rather an imposition on them, according to their respective castes. The lower castes were denied the privilege to own land due to caste bias, the little land that they could use or had was taken from them overtime via fraud, the goons that had been gossiping outside the Thakur's house in the story talk of such bravado practiced by the Thakurs, with influence and money. Money seems to solve all their problems that leads to the worship of the upper castes by the less fortunate and less educated.

Intermingling of caste has never been a trend in the Indian society and its bifurcation can be viewed as a deliberate lifestyle choice adopted by the upper castes and imposed on the lower castes. Cases of the lower castes been treated as personal servants or rather slaves without wages, rights, respect and even an ounce of humanity had been common place.

What little we read about Gangi's life in the story "The Thakur's well" is in reference to her work routine, where she has had to labour all day long, to come back and care for a sickly husband. Jokhu had been unwell for some time and Gangi had been attending to him at home, it can be referenced that they neither had the opportunity for any medical care nor any money for it.

Education can be seen missing from the lives of Gangi and her counterparts, while Gangi is smart enough to understand that her husband's health would deteriorate if he were to consume the foul smelling water, neither Gangi nor Jokhu are aware of the little fact that just by the simple procedure of boiling the same water they could have made it safe for consumption.

These lower castes were known and treated like untouchables for the longest time, till the time reforms were made in the constitution and strict actions were taken against the people found practicing the bias. Their entry at common places like temples, schools, playgrounds, feasts etc. had been banned; they were beaten when found in these places or in the dwellings of the upper castes. But it is ironical that these so-called upper caste men who had been downright against a lower caste touching their things and having them close to them could easily beat them to pulp without thinking about the same 'contamination' they fear otherwise.

Education had been denied to the people belonging to the lower castes on the basis that the teacher and the other students had belonged to upper castes and the intermingling of caste was not seen in a positive light, along with the 'fear' of 'contamination' that has been carried for ages now, to add further insult to this injury, the mindset of the people belonging to lower caste was moulded by the upper caste men using their power, money and politics that education had been kept at bay from them. Education was a key to progress which was held captive by the upper castes, it can be inferred that one of the reasons that Jokhu does not receive any medical help is that the only doctors available would have belonged to upper caste and refused to attend to a lower caste patient with a stigma of 'untouchability' attached to him.



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Rebellion had been rare and generally crushed brutally in the case of Dalits until they started with an organized movement in the later years, the story unfolds prior to a launched struggle for the mental freedom of Dalits and their fight for respect and equality in society. But this fight was crushed with physical violence and occasionally mere threats, from powerful people. This controlling and crushing of rebellion was not achieved in a day, but rather starts with the very birth of a child, as they are biased against from the very beginning. Extreme humiliation and violence was used with few and the example of those few was used for the rest to follow; no hesitation was practiced to use the same violence on the rest.

“The Thakur’s Well” presents a dilemma where the society at large had denied the rights of a section of the same society without any consideration on humanitarian grounds. Basic necessities like water, is the base of this story, water which constitutes 70% of a human body and also generally seen as a commodity which is free of cost, only recently has it been marketed as a saleable object. The harsh reality that Gangi and her counterparts from her caste had to walk miles to get water from a well, while water was available in other wells that only the upper castes could use and was out of bounds for a select few.

After a cursory read of the story one may be deluded to think that the tale narrates just the hardships and humiliations Gangi, Jokhu and the other dalits were metted with by, but a closer read opens the gates to the procedure by which this humiliation and discrimination is set in place. Fear, has been very neatly tucked into the storyline by Premchand, making it as a given and something which both the characters and the readers come to expect. Fear has been utilised as a psychological warfare to manipulate the oppressed all over the world. Obviously, Premchand’s insight into this aspect is presented through references made by Gangi and Jokhu in every conversation that they have in the story. This fear comes naturally to the characters, for they have had this experience for ages, where any ‘chapter’ was taught with an iron fist. The fear of being humiliated in society for a short coming which is a created ‘short coming’, whether valid or invalid, justified or unjustified had not been given any thought.

In any hierarchy every subject strives to be at the top with all the power and once that power has been achieved, all their thoughts and actions are directed to keep that power intact. The caste system in India can very easily be featured to this thought process, where the upper castes had been using their position if power to manipulate the rest and keep that power with them. By denying basic rights like dignity, identity-beyond ones caste and education, the upper castes have kept the lower castes at their behest for as long as they could exploit them.

Fear is injected into their minds by taking advantage of their illiteracy, where scriptures they cannot read or decipher are quoted to make them believe that belonging to a caste by birth decides the occupation they have to take up and are forever doomed to be a lower caste, to be treated as less than human. This continues to the next stage where education is denied further, eliminating any



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chance of them realizing that this imposed destiny is not their ultimate fate and they can have an out and have an equal right to live in this society as any so called upper caste.

As a mechanism to keep them underfoot, they are time and again made to realize their position in society by humiliating them. Since education, owning land for agriculture was out of question and any occupation that they hold on to is the one provided to them by default of their caste and not on talent or interest, economical development had been automatically stunted. Stuck in the vicious cycle of this caste based discrimination they had little choice but to depend on the largess of the 'Thakur' of the village for a loan or a kindness. But the reality was worse, the loan was never really seen as a loan, but rather a certificate for free labour and the 'kindness' was paid back in many folds. The terminology was just a way to lure them in for the time being and the terms set were so harsh that they usually had no way of paying it back and eventually ended up working for the amount many many folds.

The fear of being beaten up brutally and atrocities of the cruellest kinds had been ingrained by example overtime. Gangi remembers something similar while she crouched in a darkened corner with fear as she waited right outside the Thakur's house, of a time when a man, who had been beaten up for refusing to work as a labourer while he had belonged to a lower caste, this sends down shivers down Gangi's back, for she could imagine the punishment she would have to face had she been caught. Jokhu's and Gangi's conversation, his refusal and a warning about Gangi's plan to fetch water from any other well from the village can be viewed as a swift reminder that her caste had her fate tied when it came to infringing into the territory of the upper castes, she would be beaten to a pulp.

Jokhu's surprise at Gangi's suggestion or rather yet her determination of fetching water from one of the 'other' wells in the village is very easily understandable by not just the reader but by Gangi herself. His reply to her suggestion was a very well stated truth, that if she were to go to the Thakur's well asking for water should be met with fists and beaten to a pulp; while the *Brahmin* would curse her and the Merchant would rob her blind. Gangi was already aware of these consequences, but had a glimmer of optimism left in her that she carried with her till she reached right outside the gates of the Thakur's house. She knew she could not possibly beg for water from the household, there was no chance of being entertained by the Thakur's with such a request.

Premchand has managed to bring his characters and their situations to life by his narrative technique and a sensitive approach on the subject. Gangi and Jokhu were desperate for some clean water, but the only source available to them to gain this basic necessity had been contaminated by a dead animal, presumably all the other dalits of the village would have been facing the same problem, had it been too much to ask, on the part of Gangi to be able to fetch some clean water, is a question that the readers are left asking.



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But rebellion does rise up her throat as she sat crouching in a darkened corner, for the Thakurs household to settle for the night and waiting for the right opportunity to steal some water. She had been within earshot of the village gossips quite by accident, while they chatted away in their drunken ramblings about the heroics escapades of the Thakurs over these few decades. The idea that the escapades that these men are known for are performed with the help of money, fraud and exploitation of the oppressed is in direct contrast with their defined roles according to the same caste system that marks a certain sect as untouchables. Gangi was outraged on this and questions the system which makes her a lower caste and discarded to the miserable life of discrimination, humiliation and fear while presenting these exploiters as heroes, upper castes with all the privileges and worships them, even while they continue to perform all immoral and corrupt practices for all to watch and praise even, as the village gossips outside the Thakur's house are seen doing in the story. But before this anger could take root to rebellion Gangi heard footsteps approaching her and all her pent up anger immediately leaches out to make way for the all encompassing fear. Her anger over the unfairness of the situation is correct and justified, which has been presented in a manner which makes it come alive in words. But the reality of her situation drove that anger away almost immediately and fear replaced it. The fear she experiences is a familiar one, fear for her life; for she was aware of the consequences she would have to face on being caught on her plan. Her question about this unfairness is a valid one; Gangi's character very articulately presents the injustice where everyone in the village was allowed to fetch water from these wells except a select few.

This fear of being caught and the subsequent punishment it would entail is very deeply embedded into Gangi's psyche and the story depicts that in her action of shrinking further into the darkened corner on a slightest hint. Her mind continues to dwell on the fear and it mixes with her memories of cruelties witnessed or heard, a memory of the recent past comes to haunt her, when a fellow caste member had been brutally beaten up just because he had refused to work as a labourer. The incident haunted her and it presented her reality more clearly, where her fate would be on the same lines on being caught 'contaminating' the drinking water well of the upper castes.

Premchand has used the metaphor of 'contamination of water' in a very ironical manner, while the dead animal in the well frequented by Gangi for her daily needs is a contamination of the literal sense and a health hazard, the contamination of the well within the compound of the Thakur's house is due to a dalit fetching water from it and is a 'constructed contamination' to serve the purpose of the power structure. Had Gangi been caught her fate would have been worse than death for 'contaminating' the well, but because she managed to escape with a bit of luck and just in time. What is more important to notice is that because no one actually saw her fetching water from the well and handling the rope and the container the well was not considered to be contaminated, while on the other hand Gangi had not seen the dead animal fall into the well or spotted it in the well,



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but the water is still contaminated and easily judged so by the foul smell it was emitting. This very neatly presents the author's argument about these beliefs of caste related prejudices and their being baseless in nature and that they are just constructed notions made to facilitate the ones already in power to maintain it.

The author has very cleverly presented the caste and the class difference by introducing the wives from the Thakur household. These women come out cribbing about their position in their household to each other, sometime later in the night; while Gangi had been desperately hoping for an opportunity. As these women continue to talk about their banal domestic troubles and think of all the better matched they had discarded for their current marriages, Gangi sits their hidden in a corner shrinking further at their every word. The difference between these women and Gangi screams with agony, but a terrified Gangi is too engrossed in her attempt at survival that she doesn't even realize it. The pettiness of the problems faced by the other two women as against the risk Gangi was taking for 'water' sums up the caste difference.

Gangi almost makes it and for a moment elation had filled her heart. She had approached the well after the household had retired for the day, stealthily lowering her pitcher into the well and with the adrenalin pumping she had managed to fetch the pitcher with herculean strength and up till the brim of the well, when suddenly the gates to the household had been thrown open. After all that waiting and effort she lost the pitcher full of clean water to the age old fear and flew from the scene. She carried the shouts that followed her home to haunt and torment her for the rest of her life, safe but scared and disheartened she made her way home to witness her husband lift that same tumbler, full of the contaminated water and drinking it.

The ending of the story is a very clear defeat of Gangi's determination. The helplessness of the characters in this story has been depicted not just by their circumstances but also by wittingly bringing in parallels of the escapades of the Thakurs, the *Brahmins*, the monetarily sufficient and blooming lives of the merchants and the easy and hassle free lives of the few who operated under these powerful men. The women from Thakur household also provide a sharp contrast between Gangi's and their lives. All these elements distributed evenly all throughout the story present the reader with ammunition to realize and access the unjust discrimination rampant in our society.

Premchand has presented the story with a well formed structure, which makes it easy for the readers to grasp his ideas about caste based discrimination and its baseless nature, without any intervention from the narrator. The narrator only intervenes once, while he points out the enormity of the lack of education in this discriminated sect. Had Gangi or Jokhu been provided basic education and not denied it on a caste bias, they might have been aware that boiling the contaminated water would have made it safe for drinking and the situation would not have escalated to this level. But that is not to say, that any discrimination should be entertained at all.



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The story is set in rural India, Jokhu and Gangi a lower caste couple are in their hut; Jokhu has been unwell for a while. The story starts when Jokhu takes some water to quench his thirst and he finds that the water has a foul smell. He scrunches his nose and takes the tumbler away in disgust and asks his wife about the stinking water. On his query, his wife Gangi is puzzled, for the water had smelt fine when she had fetched it last night, as was her usual routine. The well from which she was allowed to fetch water for her daily use was at quite a considerable distance and multiple trips was not possible. When she brought the tumbler close to her nose to take a sniff, she could smell the stench immediately, she deduced that some animal must have fell into the well and died. Her first instinct was to mentally count all the other places she could fetch water from, now that her usual source had been eliminated. The Thakur of the village had his own well, but he hailed from a higher caste and would never let Gangi even in close proximity of it, forget fetching water from it. Her next thought was that of the rich merchant in the village, he lived at the other end of the village, but he wouldn't let her fetch water from his well either. There were just these three wells in the village, two out of bounds due to her caste and one fouled.

Gangi had been caring for her ill husband for a while now, Jokhu tried to tamp down his thirst for as long as possible, but unable to stop, he asked his wife to pass him the stinking water and that he would hold his nose and gulp down the water. Gangi, while was unaware that the stinking water would be safe to consume after boiling it, but she knew that if Jokhu were to drink this foul water his health would get worse.

Gangi decided that she would get some clean water for Jokhu and on her announcement, a surprised Jokhu asks after her plan, she replies that both the Thakur and the merchant have a well and expresses faith that they would let her fetch some water. Jokhu's reply to her faith is a scoff; he warns her that she would be beaten to a pulp by the Thakur's thugs; the Brahmin would curse her for her attempt and the merchant would rob her blind. Jokhu's bitterness comes to the forefront when he is talking about the upper caste people of his village and how they do not wish to understand the problems of people like Jokhu; having sympathy for their condition was too big an expectation. He points out that the poor and the marginalized have no role or acceptance in the lives of the rich and favoured; even if they were to drop dead the very next second, these people would not blink an eye, there would be no sympathy and neither would they help the dying man. He questions Gangi, that did she really expect that such heartless people would bring themselves to forget her caste and get over their caste bias and let her fetch water from their wells; it was a rhetorical question, there was no answer to this question and neither was it required.

Jokhu's question puts the reality of our society in its crudest form. Gangi also understands this but she had been hoping against hope that some amount of humanity would persuade these men of the upper eons and they might let her fetch a tumbler of water. But, she realized, that there was no way that she would be allowed to take water from the wells of these men, at least with their permission.



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She was at a stalemate, she still had to figure a way out to get some clean water to drink and she had no other options.

The story jumps from the cottage scene to where Gangi is currently hiding and bidding her time, till she gets a chance to sneak into the Thakur's compound. The sun has gone down, night has fallen and the labourers have slept off after a hard day at work, while Gangi stays hidden and listens to the town gossips who have also gathered close to her hiding place. These men have no gallantry tales of honour and mercy to share, but they have numerous juicy tit-bits of the escapades the Thakurs of the village had been up to. They have high praises for the Thakurs for according to them these men of high caste know how to get things done, albeit with their money and pseudo power. All this while Gangi has been listening in on these conversations crouching in that dark and her eyes fixed on the well; she starts to question her state, where everyone in the village is allowed to fetch water from this well without a question while a few unlucky ones, like herself have been barred.

Rebellion climbed her throat like bile as she stewed in her hiding spot while, the harsh reality of her position leaves her motionless. But, that doesn't stop her from scorning the situation that these wasted, gossiping men were considered superior than her! The Thakurs were cheats and bullies but just because they were born in a certain caste and have a thread tied across their bodies they were somehow considered superior in the society.

While Gangi's insides churned with the poison of unfairness of the society she heard footsteps and she froze in horror and anticipating the approaching onslaught. She was very much aware of the consequences, if she were to be found the Thakur's well. If possible she squeezed herself further tightening her hold on her pot and the rope, moving further into the darkness. While she waited for her fate to unfold, whether she would be caught or not; she is reminded of an incident where Mangu, a man from her caste had been beaten brutally by the Thakurs on the mere refusal to work as a labourer, the thought scared her further.

Her vigil continues further into the night, as she waits for the household of the Thakurs to quieten down in the hope that she would be able to fetch some water. She heard two women making their way to the well, engaged in a conversation. As they drew water out of the well they cribbed about their situations within their household. Ironically, these women belonging to the upper eons of the society talk about how they have been bound by society and the unfairness of their situation within earshot of Gangi, who is hiding under a tree just so she would be able to fetch some clean drinking water, a basic human need that has been denied to her by the society based on her caste.

After the women go back inside, Gangi slowly approached the well. By this time the compound was deserted, but Gangi still kept an eye out for anyone approaching the well. She hurriedly lowered her pot into the well and with a herculean effort she pulled the full pot from the well. It was as she bent to pull the pot out of the rims of the well, that she heard the door to the Thakur's



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home fly open. A startled Gangi let go of the pot in her fear gripped state, the full pot made a huge splash as it hit the surface of the water. Gangi ran for her life drenched in fear she ran away from enquiring shouts of the Thakur. The story ends at a morbid tone, after her close shave with danger for clean water Gangi enters her home to see her husband Jokhu about to drink the stinking water. The short story “The Thakur’s Well’ by Premchand has Gangi, a woman from a lower caste as the protagonist. The story has been narrated from the point of view of Gangi, but by the omniscient narrator. Gangi, has been hardened to labour and humiliation due to her caste and a bias that exists in the society. The story is very obviously presented with a sympathetic tilt towards Gangi and her husband Jokhu and on those basic can be considered a part of Dalit Literature. On other basis like realism, revolutionary and progressive mind are a different story altogether. Gangi is an optimistic character, who was aware of the caste bias and knew that she would never be allowed to fetch water from the well of the upper caste Hindus of her village but had been harbouring hope that some pity might be showered on her. But this optimism does not carry to the very end, in fact, even while she had been asserting her optimistic views; she held her fear and various reservations. The characters of Gangi and Jokhu fail at the stakes of having revolutionary or progressive minds, but their failure to this stance has been backed up with fear, a very real fear for their wellbeing, the fight has literally been beaten out of them. While Gangi had been crouched in a darkened corner, waiting for an opportunity to steal some clean water, she had overheard fell drunkards from the village praising the immoral deeds of the Thakurs, this had made the bile rise up her throat, that while these undeserving men were allowed to fetch water from the wells of these so-called upper-castes, select few, like her were denied this due to their caste, but this through quickly leaves her, when she hears someone coming towards her.

Gangi and Jokhu do not discuss any of their personal experiences of being beaten up or humiliation, but the reference to another fellow-caste member and the severe punishment he was meted out for refusing to be a labourer is a constant reminder in Gangi’s mind. While the fear, harboured by both Gangi and Jokhu ring true to a reality, but her anger and the very absence of a feeling of revolt in the minds of this couple leaves the readers wondering. They seem to have accepted their fate, while clearly they were in no position to fight for their rights (illiterate and ill) their lack of anger at their situation leaves something out and the readers are forced to think that would a character like Gangi, who takes it upon herself, risking her life for a glass full of clean water, not have some anger, some need to revolt against her situation? This story presents a character which is oppressed by the majority, who has had her fight driven out of her, but even then she decides to risk her life to procure a glass of clean water for her husband. But this same character who harbours some bitterness towards her oppressors, does not revolt or even think about finding a way out of her predicament. At the end of the story, Jokhu consumes the ‘contaminated’ water and Gangi witnesses the scene, this leaves the characters and the readers defeated. The world



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presented by Premchand is a world where the characters representing dalits at large have given up hope for any change and accepted their Caste fate, with no fight, no revolt and no progression thoughts within them.

Conclusion:

“The Thakur’s Well” is an unflinching portrayal of social injustice and entrenched caste hierarchies. Through Gangi’s quiet courage and Jokhu’s helplessness, Premchand exposes a society that denies basic human rights to a section of its own people. The story underscores that discrimination is not only physical but psychological, reinforced by fear, illiteracy and economic dependence. Gangi’s act of risking her life to fetch water symbolizes hope and desperation, but her retreat before fear and eventual failure illustrate the magnitude of oppression. The narrative makes clear that denial of land, education and medical access perpetuates poverty and keeps communities subservient. The metaphor of “contaminated water” is powerful—while an actual dead animal fouls the Dalits’ well, the “pollution” feared by the upper castes is purely social and constructed. The absence of revolt in the characters, despite their awareness of injustice, reflects how systemic oppression can erode agency. Premchand’s sympathetic yet realistic depiction invites readers to question the foundations of caste, privilege and morality. It remains relevant, reminding us that dignity, equality and access to essentials like water are still contested rights in many contexts.

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